

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Forests & Forest Health

Witness Statement

Statement of the Honorable

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Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health

House Resources Committee

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H.R. 4021

Madam Chairman, I appreciate your holding this hearing on the impending monument designation for the Sequoia Forest by the President. This unwanted designation and the Administration's anti-public policies has a profound effect on my district which includes Tulare and Kern counties of California. The Sequoia Forest is essentially a backbone in my district, and so I thank you for the chance to speak on behalf of Mr. Radanovich's bill to create an advisory group of scientists to review in a non-political fashion this designation.

I have many problems with what the Administration is doing, many of which relate to the closed nature of the process. We have legal protections in place now for the Giant Sequoias, but the President does not say why they think the trees are not protected. A more open process would allow us to know what they are trying to accomplish, reveal why they think current law is not sufficient, and how various public interests in the forest will be preserved. We are told there will be a secret report by the Forest Service that will not be available to Congress or the public.

I went to the Visalia public meeting and had the questions below and still have no answers. I was left with little doubt that the end result of the study will be a recommendation to designate the Sequoia Forest as a monument, regardless of the facts. If a Congressman can not get information about what the Administration is trying to do, how are citizens supposed to know what is happening and evaluate how it impacts them?

How will the Administration address the people's right to enjoy public lands?

Public lands belong to the public. I have come to believe that those in the federal government who are entrusted with caring for the land have forgotten this fundamental principle. This proposal by the President must be viewed in light of other anti-public measures like the roadless initiative, higher permit fees, the road building moratorium, special interest groups' efforts to limit access, and forest management plans that restrict multiple uses such as cattlemen's ability to get grazing permits. Where does this leave senior citizens and the disabled who are not able to strap on a 30 pound backpack and hike through the forest? For that matter, where does it leave the ordinary family who can not spend a week of hiking to visit these isolated

vistas? Even without this designation, I hear from schools who can not afford to pay the high rents to their Forest Service landlords, from camps for juveniles that are having their facility permits frozen, and from various recreational users like snowmobilers and mountain bikers who fear they are being shut out.

Doesn't current law already strongly protect these trees and the environment?

Efforts to fence off our Sequoia are not just contrary to common sense and interest but also against the law. The Antiquities Act says the President must identify the smallest area to designate. The giant Sequoia groves, however, are a very small portion of the area being studied; they constitute a mere 29,000 acres while the land under consideration amounts to four hundred thousand acres. When people ask me "Don't you want to protect the giant Sequoia", my answer is "What has that got to do with any of this?" The Sequoias are protected now. No one has cut down an ancient giant Sequoia on federal public land for over 100 years. Moreover, within California forests, no tree of any species can be cut if it is over 30 inches in diameter. The law forbids it now.

Also, I have a little bit of deja vu in this matter. Back in 1984 we passed a federal statute - the California Wilderness Act - which says that land not designated at that time as a wilderness or planning area will be managed for multiple-use. With the guarantee that giant Sequoias were protected, people were told they could still camp, fish, graze cattle, harvest timber, collect firewood, have cabins, and drive into public lands. Efforts by this Administration to eliminate multiple-use incrementally over the past eight years violate that law and renege on promises made in 1984. In light of current law, people still want to know why the Administration needs more legal protections.

Why isn't the Administration managing the forests?

The greatest threat to giant Sequoias is human neglect - not from cutting trees down, but from doing nothing and allowing other tree species like firs and cedars to grow between the Sequoias and choke them off from reproducing. Many instances of so-called environmental protection, the most vocal proponents for saving an endangered species, are the ones most responsible for killing them. Whereas regulated timber cutting of trees growing between the Sequoias followed by regulated fires to promote regeneration and seed germination would be the healthiest management tool to save the Sequoias and help them thrive, instead with the huge amount of forest fuels built up from years of "protection" a fire would likely wipe out our natural heritage and these beautiful mighty trees.

Aren't we better off enforcing current law and forgetting about new restrictions

The legacy of the Clinton Administration has been one of bypassing Congress. Former Congressman George Brown introduced bills in the past Congresses to designate the Sequoia as wilderness. They were not adopted. Yet this Administration takes this as an excuse to act on its own. As I said, there is a reason for current Congressional inaction. Congress has already acted years ago and the law protects these species. Of course, the Administration could leave a true legacy of cleaning up the forest, providing adequate roads into the heart of the forest so people can access and enjoy their land, and improving forest health by removing fuels like debris, underbrush, and competing firs and cedars from around the Sequoias. The Administration should weigh the true protection of the Sequoias and the rights and interests of the millions who enjoy our forests against special interest groups. Local people and our trees should win.

H.R. 4021 is needed to put conservation back in the hands of forestry experts

I have joined my colleagues in cosponsoring H.R. 4021 for an advisory committee of scientists to advise the Forest Service and the U.S. Department of Agriculture about the worth of this designation. Its time that science and facts, not politics, determine the future of our natural heritage. I invite the Administration to come to Congress, sit down and discuss what they want, and let us try to hammer out a workable agreement in an open fashion. Teddy Roosevelt left us a legacy of conserving wildlife and lands. If keeping the public out of these lands is the Clinton Legacy, then I want no part of it.

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